



U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing

Religious Minorities and Governance in Iraq

December 7, 2023

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

Frederick A. Davie, USCIRF Vice-Chair

Thank you very much, Chair Cooper. I join the Chair in welcoming you all to today's hearing.

As Chair Cooper outlined, the state of Iraq's political environment and related matters of governance are directly connected to freedom of religion or belief for Iraqis of all faith backgrounds.

USCIRF has expressed concern over the apparently increasing power of militias. These include the Popular Mobilization Forces, or PMF, which are subsidized by the Iraqi government, often linked to militant Shi'a Muslim political powers in Iran, and exert great influence at the highest levels of Iraq's government. Several

PMF brigades have been designated by the United States and others as human rights abusers that target religious minorities for abuse at checkpoints and engage in other forms of harassment. One of these, the Babylonian Brigade, is run by the notorious militia leader-turned-politician, Rayan al-Kildani. Mr. Kildani has invoked his Chaldean Catholic background to deflect scrutiny from his Iran-linked brigade's attempts to usurp the political representation and properties of Christian communities. In fact, reports indicate Mr. Kildani helped inform President Abdul Latif Rashid's decision this past July to revoke the authority of the Chaldean patriarch, Cardinal Sako, to administer Christian properties. Cardinal Sako has long been a vocal critic of the power of Iran-linked PMF brigades and an advocate for meaningful political representation for Iraq's Christians.

The past year in Iraq has also seen an increase in legislative activity that could harm religious freedom and religious minority communities. Community activists have expressed concern over draft laws introduced in Parliament on freedom of expression and cybercrimes. Both contain vague language potentially subjecting atheists, Shi'a Muslim theological dissenters, and Sunni Muslims and other religious minorities to prosecution for expressing opinions deemed contrary to "public morals" or "public order," or for defaming religious sects or leaders. Christian and Yazidi business owners have also objected to reactivated laws

banning the import or sale of alcohol, which is forbidden to drink in Islam but permitted in other faiths.

And, last month, existing political sectarianism between and among rival Shi'a and Sunni Muslim parties intensified with the Federal Supreme Court's ruling to end the speakership of Sunni parliament speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi. Additional disruptions to the already shaky religious and ethnic balance in Baghdad risk a return to escalated conflict and political crisis, especially in relation to the upcoming provincial elections. This ongoing religious and political instability also limits the government's ability to devote resources to initiatives that would improve the condition of religious minority groups and advance religious freedom for all Iraqis. Today, we seek to learn more about the affirmative steps the Iraqi government and civil society can take to better protect freedom of religion or belief for the Iraqi people.